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ROOTED DEEP: DISCOVERING THE LITERARY IDENTITY OF MYTHOPOEIC FANTASIST GEORGE MACDONALD ¹

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Abstract

This paper is a conversational reassessment of George MacDonald, the Victorian fantasist who so profoundly shaped such writers as C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. Primary research challenges the common portrayal of MacDonald as an accidental novelist, revealing instead his clear trajectory and vocation as a devoted literary scholar. Clarifying the definition of *mythopoeic* as applied by the Oxford Inklings to MacDonald draws attention to their conviction that attentive response to one's literary roots is what engenders novel literature with transformative potential. Further research proves this to be in keeping with the work and legacy of MacDonald and his mentor A.J. Scott. An intentional participation in this relational nature of literary tradition is a crucial element of the work and legacy to which the Inklings and their successors are heirs.

Keywords: *George MacDonald; Mythopoeic; Fantasy; Imagination; Tolkien; CS Lewis; AJ Scott; English Literature; Barfield; Sidney; Dante*

This article is a journey—a Progress if you will—along a part of my own adventurous path of discovery with the 19th Century author and scholar George MacDonald. The passage is far from over: I am still a pilgrim. Like MacDonald's characters, I have taken a lot of pauses in libraries filled with other books, stopped in houses hosted by grandmotherly women, meandered down paths which were perhaps not for me, and even at times lain ineffectually like Adela on a couch, requiring the intervention of friends to be sufficiently fortified before carrying on. When I do pick up the thread again, I can feel overwhelmed

¹ This paper is based on a lecture originally delivered at the Oxford University conference on 'MacDonald and Modern Fantasy' (August 2014), a version of which will appear in the conference publication. The title comes from a phrase used initially by MacDonald, when referencing *England's Antiphon*: "rooted deep in all its story" (3). The sentiment is reiterated by Tolkien in *The Lord of the Rings* when he writes: "Deep roots are not reached by the frost" (I 257).

by the multifaceted path that spins out before me—yet MacDonald's transcendent tales continue to compel me onward.

Two decades ago I rediscovered George MacDonald. Needing a break from a paper I was supposed to be writing on John Bunyan, I picked *The Golden Key* up off a friend's shelf—a book I had not read since my early teens. It was delightful to rediscover Tangle and Mossy, the Green-haired Grandmother, and the Old Men. I was not surprised to recognize hints of *Narnia* here and there in the tale. What I had not expected was to be finding hints of Bunyan as well; and what seemed to be more than hints—perhaps even a response to Bunyan. Suddenly my initial plan for the Bunyan paper was out the window, and I was off to the library to find out more about this man MacDonald, whose stories I had loved as a child but about whom I knew very little.

The library did not have masses of material, but with what it did have I was able to build up a picture. I was excited to discover that not only could I easily establish that MacDonald was a close reader of Bunyan, but that he and his family had gained some renown for their performances of *Pilgrims Progress*. I was somewhat thrown by the fact that the only critical writing I could find specifically on *The Golden Key* assured me that that key was a phallic symbol and that MacDonald's writing was determined by 'frustrated desires' and a life-long angst induced by deprivation of breast-milk as an infant (Cf. Wolff, *Golden Key*). Not quite the explication I had expected. But I remained nonetheless fascinated by the author that was emerging, and I began to wonder about conducting more than simply a class paper on MacDonald.

Here was—so I read—a rural preacher who, despite a childhood of repressive and dour Calvinism that warned against the evils of such things as fiddle music and fairytales, had somehow risen above his circumstances to become one of the grandfathers of modern fantasy. Having escaped the narrowness of a small backwater town, MacDonald's world was transformed at university, and especially by his accidental discovery of the German Romantics. This serendipity was essentially his salvation, for as a failed preacher kicked out of his church MacDonald turned to writing fiction in order to feed his ever-growing family. Although *Phantastes* was pretty much universally scorned when it came out, MacDonald's 'realistic novels' were more popular, and through them and the *Pilgrims Progress* performances he was able to keep things going: a failed preacher turned novelist, and fortunately fantasist as well, as his non-religious—at times even anti-religious—fantasy is the only reason he is still known today.

That is the picture I gleaned from the texts to which I had access twenty-one years ago. And that is pretty much how I presented him to others—with the exception of the non-or-anti-religious fantasy bit. I had not re-read enough of the fantasy to be cock-sure, but even in the little I had re-read there was a lot of reiteration of Bible verses and even explicit—and positive—references to God,

so that perspective seemed a bit problematic to me. But it added to my curiosity. How did this creative writer appear out of nowhere, crafting these amazing tales? Tales that—so I discovered the more reading I did—had been such an influence on so many other great writers: G.K. Chesterton, C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, James Barrie, E. Nesbit, Madeleine L'Engle, Ursula Le Guin, Maurice Sendak, Frederick Buechner, Jeffrey Overstreet, among others. He was a storyteller for storytellers, really: a pioneer, whose work was to inform not only 20th Century fantasists, but continues to impact fantasists of the 21st Century.

I had C.S. Lewis' *Anthology* of George MacDonald quotations sitting—unread—on my shelf, so I pulled it down and perused the introduction. What Lewis wrote certainly countered the claims that MacDonald's fantasy was non-religious, and while he gave mixed reviews on MacDonald's style he clearly adulated MacDonald's ability to craft stories that could change lives—and not just his own. Lewis connected this with MacDonald's gift of what he called the *mythopoeic*. Lewis also included a bit of biography, but it was limited in detail (and, I later realized, in accuracy as well) and so began a new stage on my journey: a foray into primary material.

Thus, too, began a very protracted reconstruction of my image of who MacDonald was, and what he did. The more I read about MacDonald's home and childhood, the more nuanced my understanding of that environment became. The same happened with his early experiences as a preacher, and as a novelist. I became addicted to library and university archives, because in these—both in the UK and North America—I was discovering letters and memoirs that were not only filling in missing pieces, but were sometimes directly contradicting 'received truths' that had been passed down—in good faith—through 20th Century scholarship¹. I even discovered that some of the published letters had been abbreviated, or had had portions of sentences removed without acknowledgement—even to the extent of altering my reception of the meaning of those sentences. And MacDonald himself was not looking anything like the description I gave above. Nor was he appearing quite the 'miracle child' he had once seemed. Rather, he was emerging as an almost predictable product of his environment... once one knew what that environment actually was².

¹ The older I get, and the more mistakes I myself make, the greater my grace for the mistakes of others. I am deeply grateful for examples of scholars like the Inklings scholar Christopher Mitchell, who was widely acknowledged for his humility. It is not a quality easily cultivated in academic halls, yet in the long run it elicits much better scholarship.

² The libraries and archives from which the following information was gleaned are primarily: Beinecke Library, Yale University; King's College Archives, Aberdeen; King's College University Library, London; Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College; Gladstone's Library, Hawarden, Wales.

Instead of the survivor of a stereotyped ‘Calvinist childhood’, I discovered a man whose father clearly articulated his desire for God over denomination, was willing to discuss varying doctrines, and openly voiced his desire to continue to change and grow in how he perceived the Divine. With *his* father a Catholic-born, fiddle-playing, Presbyterian elder; his mother an Independent church rebel; his first wife (MacDonald’s mother) a sister to the Gallic-speaking radical who became Moderator of the disrupting Free Church; and his second wife (MacDonald’s step-mother, to whom MacDonald was also very close) the daughter of a Celtic Episcopalian minister—merely using the tag “Calvinist” for his son’s theological background began to seem both simplistic and misleading.

The church of MacDonald’s childhood is sometimes described as ‘Cowie’s church’—followed by a damning description of Reverend Cowie’s fundamentalism. But I quickly discovered that aside from the fact that Cowie’s theology is said to have changed fairly dramatically from when he founded the church to when he retired from the post, Cowie actually died a full twenty years before MacDonald was even born—hardly a key influence (Cf. Troup 8 ff).

And MacDonald himself was no miracle aberration from that congregation—if anything, it was the congregation itself that was an aberration: amongst MacDonald’s peers alone there emerged a Celtic scholar, at least three biblical scholars, a doctorate of divinity, three journal editors, two church denomination moderators, several pastors and missionaries, and Britain’s first Sinologist—Asian scholar—a man who taught in Oxford and whose work is still studied in China today (that’s some ‘youth group’!). And in case anyone is tempted to think these pursuits were considered deviant: not only was MacDonald invited back to lecture on Tennyson, but the Sinologist—James Legge—was also invited back to small rural Huntly to lecture on Confucius.

As I delved I also learned that not only were fairytales and fiction *not* banned from MacDonald’s childhood—as a few sources had assured me they were—MacDonald was actually raised in an unusually literate environment. For example, one of MacDonald’s maternal uncles was a famed Celtic scholar and editor of the Gaelic Highland Dictionary, who collected fairy tales and Celtic poetry in the midst of his campaign to keep the Gaelic language and culture alive; MacDonald’s paternal grandfather had supported the publication of an edition of Ossian—that controversial Celtic text that some claim kick-started European Romanticism and was certainly key to Goethe’s *Young Werther*; MacDonald’s step-uncle was a Shakespeare scholar; his paternal cousin another Celtic scholar; and his parents were both readers—his dad with an acknowledged penchant for Burns, Newton, Cowper, Chalmers, Coleridge, and Darwin, to name a few; and his mother with a classical education that included multiple languages.

In reflections on his childhood, MacDonald speaks of reading Arabian Nights obsessively; of loving, if not understanding, his father's copy of "Rime of The Ancient Mariner"; and of initiating his passion for Shakespeare (Amell 103). As a youth he actually delighted in reading Paradise Lost whilst flung across the back of his horse (Greville 54). MacDonald's schoolmaster recollected him regaling classmates with legends of the local castle (*Huntly* n.a.). And MacDonald and his cousins regularly taught Bible stories in Sunday School. This was not a wonder child, deprived of literature and story yet miraculously discovering it; MacDonald's upbringing was unusually rich in a family-sanctioned Western literary tradition. And all this in addition to the remarkable Scottish education system from which he clearly benefitted—in his primary school, this not only included Rhetoric, Mathematics, and French, but also the study of Classics in Latin and Greek (P. Scott 144, *Statistical* 1043).

At some point in this reconstruction, it hit home to me that MacDonald did not even grow up in Huntly. He grew up on a farm outside Huntly. (It is somewhat ironic that this took so long for me to realize, as I also grew up on a farm. Perhaps it is only those who have who know just how substantially different the identity of a farm kid is from a 'townie'—or what MacDonald called 'a cit').¹ I even learned that that frequent representation of the negative reception of *Phantastes*, referenced above, was suspect: once I started looking at the actual contemporary reviews, I found many more positive ones than negative ones. The "second-hand symbol shop" review that is so frequently quoted is colourful and conveniently dramatic—but not at all representative. In fact, three years after *Phantastes* was published journals actually declared the novel "a very decided success" (Gillies 186)².

Yet despite my increasing familiarity with—and reconfiguration of—MacDonald's biography, there was one piece that still had not really shifted for me. I still saw MacDonald as a preacher-turned-author. What finally woke me up to just how wrong that image was, was my return to that word used by C.S. Lewis to describe MacDonald's fiction: *mythopoeic*. Lewis calls MacDonald "the greatest genius"—in what "may even be one of the greatest arts": Mythopoesis (*Anthology* xviii). That is a pretty high accolade: "the greatest genius" in what "may even be one of the greatest arts". I discovered that Tolkien had also used the term of MacDonald; so, too, had their student, W.H. Auden. As all three men were not only successful writers, but also highly respected literature scholars and professors, I decided to try to suss out what exactly they

¹ Cf *What's Mine's Mine*, chapter four.

² An 1861 article reads, "'Phantastes' has proved a success even as regards its circulation, and a very decided success as concerns the influence it has exerted on minds of the highest order." (For example, see discussion in Gillies, Mary Ann. *The Professional Literary Agent in Britain, 1880-1920*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007. Print).

meant by the term, to see if this would help me better figure out how a failed minister ended up becoming such a great story crafter.

So I turned briefly aside from MacDonald and looked at how Tolkien and Lewis used this word. As I have detailed my discoveries on this elsewhere, I shall not be exhaustive here, but do I believe that clarity on certain aspects of the term can enable significant insight into MacDonald's import and impact as a 'foundational fantasist'.¹ The written and verbal discussions Tolkien and Lewis held about this 'great art' reintroduced it to the public consciousness—and in the process they identified MacDonald as a prime practitioner. Often today the word mythopoeic is used to mean 'a literary myth', or is even used simply as an adjective describing something reminiscent of Middle Earth or Narnia. At its most broad, it is no more than a synonym for 'fantasy'. But it is important that Literature scholars and, most particularly, those interested in fantasy and/or the Inklings, recognize that this is *not* how Lewis and Tolkien used the term. Indeed for them the word was not even restricted to the genre of fantasy—although they did argue that that realm lends itself particularly well to it. Understanding *mythopoeic* as applied by those Oxford Literature professors who became some of the century's greatest fantasy authors can shed light on not only their own literary creations—and those of MacDonald—but also on those who can be considered following in the lineage: writers such as Le Guin, L'Engle, Gaiman, Clarke, Overstreet.

Tolkien and Lewis' understanding of Mythopoesis was finessed by their engagement with the ideas of another Inklings, Owen Barfield. Barfield, better known as a philosopher, and author of books such as *Poetic Diction* and *History of English Words*, was actually also himself a fantasist—having authored *The Silver Trumpet*. Barfield and Lewis had been friends since undergraduate days. They were delighted when they discovered that Tolkien too was a lover of language and of myth, and that he similarly valued Imagination—and soon the three of them were having deep discussions around the subject.

These discussions—perhaps the most important of which occurred as Tolkien and Lewis wandered along Addison's Walk in Oxford—had some pretty significant long-term consequences, but I will just touch on some of the key ones for the purposes of this discussion. First: they concurred that a myth is "a story out of which ever varying meanings will grow for different [recipients] in different ages", and that there exists both factual and fictive myths². For instance, they would call the Christian Gospel a myth—not meaning that it did

¹ For greater detail see chapter in Hart and Khovacs' *Tree of Tales: Tolkien, Literature, and Theology* (Baylor Press, 2007), as well as in doctoral dissertation (available on-line via University of St. Andrews).

² This particular phrase is found in C.S. Lewis' letters, September 22, 1956.

not happen, but rather that, regardless of whether or not it happened, its *story* is one that has persisted across time and cultures, and has repeatedly been considered relevant by at least some part of the population despite how incredibly different their culture might be from that out of which the story first came (as different as Lewis' 1930's Britain from first century Middle East.) A *mythopoeic* work, such as MacDonald seemed able to craft, was one that not only had transcendent potential but that also, within its space of a 'Secondary World', bore the potential for a transformative experience on the part of the reader. Not that a reader would necessarily be changed in how they saw or engaged with the Primary World once they had set the tale aside, but the possibility was there. For instance, consider Tolkien's King Théoden – and the many readers who have journeyed with him in Rohan, who forever look at trees with new eyes after having met the Ents; or, of Lewis' Lucy – and the many readers who have journeyed with her on *The Dawn Treader*, for whom the phrase "that is only what a star is made of" is somehow deeply satisfying: the change could be seemingly minor or clearly revolutionary, but something about who one is or how—or what—one sees is different. Although G.K. Chesterton, preceding Barfield, Tolkien, and Lewis, never used the word *mythopoeic*, his assertions readily concur with Lewis' as to MacDonald's 'mythopoeic gift'. He claims that reading *The Princess and the Goblin*, more than anything he had ever read, changed his way of engaging with—of viewing—the entire world; it "made," to use Chesterton's own phrase, "a difference to my whole existence" (Chesterton 9). Lewis made a similar claim of *Phantastes*. (*Anthology* xxi)

Much of what Lewis and Tolkien discussed with Barfield they later wrote about in essays such as "On Fairy Stories" (Tolkien) and "On Stories" (Lewis) and, as just indicated, was represented in their fantasy—but for anyone who has read MacDonald's essays "The Imagination: Its Functions and Its Culture" and "The Fantastic Imagination," there is little these scholars say that is new, but rather, much that is reiterated¹. I do not know if Barfield had read MacDonald's essays—it is definitely possible. Regardless, Barfield and MacDonald were certainly drawing on some of the same sources. That Coleridge was a significant influence is well-recognized; not, however, their engagement with Philip Sidney.

In his conversations with Lewis and Tolkien, as well as through his books *Poetic Diction* and *History in English Words*, Barfield drew their attention

¹ MacDonald recognized the significance of his essay "The Imagination". He described it as "one of the best things, I think, that I have ever done" (Peel 9). It is the only known lecture—of hundreds, over decades—that MacDonald ever gave from a written text. And he frequently offered it as an option. Before it appeared as the opening essay in *A Dish of Orts*, he published a part of it anonymously in 1867—it appeared in at least three journals: *The British Quarterly Review*; *Scott's Monthly Magazine*; and New York's *Eclectic Magazine of Foreign Literature*.

to Sidney (only later did I realize Sidney's immense significance to MacDonald) and specifically to Sidney's discussion of poets and poetry. Sidney, in his *Defense for Poetry*, uses examples such as Aesop's Fables and the biblical story of David and Nathan as proof of the educational power of 'poetry' (*Defense* 61)¹. One could even substitute the term 'creative writing' for 'poetry' because (as Barfield pointed out to Tolkien and Lewis) when discussing the term *poet* Sidney means, essentially, *creative writer*: a 'maker'—one who makes. Barfield details Sidney's explanation of how a 'maker' studies 'Nature', contemplates the ideas 'behind' Nature, and *thus* is able to 'deliver forth' new 'makings'. (*History* 188-190) It is *because* of the act of contemplation, as a result of that contemplation upon that which lies outside the maker that he or she is able to then make something new. This applied not only to the contemplation of one's physical environment, but also to the contemplation of the makings of other makers—works of literature, music, art.

Barfield explained that the term 'invention' in the 17th Century was not used quite like we use it today, noting that the verb *invenire* meant 'to find'. (*History* 190) MacDonald had also emphasized this in his discussion of the author as *trouver*: 'finder'. One *finds*, so that one might 'make'. ("Imagination" 14) Tolkien coined another term in his response to this discussion: 'sub-creation'—being able to assist "in the effoliation and multiple enrichment" of God's creation; rather than an author or artist being a 'mini-creator,' he or she was a type of co-creator. ("Fairy Stories" 73) Humans did not create *ex nihilo*, from nothing—like the Deity—but in response to, or perhaps even in reaction against, something. Something found, something engaged, something related. Perhaps even—according to these scholars—a type of participation.

Tolkien and Lewis were particularly struck by Barfield's discussion of the ancient semantic unities of language and myth—indeed Tolkien claims his entire outlook was modified by it. Barfield pulled Lewis and Tolkien's attention back to a time when language and myth were so closely entwined that they could not really be separated: not only was, say *spiritus* the word for *wind* and the word for *spirit* and the word for *breath*, but each of those things was understood by means of their relation to the other: one understood what 'breath' was *because* one knew what 'spirit' was *because* one knew what 'wind' was *because* one knew what 'breath' was. Barfield believed that though words had once

¹ Following the tradition partaken in by his literary mentor Sidney, MacDonald likewise does not consider the terms *poetry* and *story* mutually exclusive. He articulates this clearly in *England's Antiphon* in his discourse on the ballad (235). In his anthology on Sidney he highlights the quotation: "verse being but an ornament, and no cause to poetry; since there have been many most excellent poets that never versified. [...] It is not riming and versing that maketh a poet [but] that feigning notable images of virtues, vices, or what else, with that delightful teaching..." (*Gems* 149).

“embodied” this “unified perception,” consciousness had become increasingly fragmented as conceptual thinking developed (qtd. in Carpenter 42). He hoped that some day humans would once again be better able to reconcile the literal and the abstract, with a renewed perception informed by the past, rather than merely reverting to it¹.

Now Lewis and Tolkien concurred that a decision to seek renewed perceptions informed by the past must apply to their creative crafting if it applied their philosophies of life, and they recognized that this necessitated informed and intentional engagement with their literary past. And so as teachers and writers they modeled this: Tolkien drew upon northern European myths, such as Beowulf and the Icelandic sagas, and on British sources such as the *Mabinogion* and William Morris. Lewis’ work is not only rampant with Lucius Apuleius, Dante, Milton, Spenser, etc., but also with near-contemporaries such as Mauriac, Haggard, Chesterton, and MacDonald. Both Lewis and Tolkien came to be recognized for this careful attention to and engagement with the stories they were studying and teaching, as well as for manifesting delight in what Lewis called “source-hunting”—rooting around, being *trouvers*, finding the roots of the texts they were reading and studying in those that had come before. (*Anthology* 20) *Their* great skills at doing this *invenire*—finding—resulted eventually in their own rich ‘inventions,’ sub-creations. Tolkien called this carefully intentional apprehension and engagement, which shaped the subsequent creative transmission, an act of *Mythopoeia*². Their recognition of a literary lineage and the choice to actively engage with it—not just recognize it, not just borrow from it, but to seek it out, try to understand it, and to even ‘converse’ with it—underscores the relational element that must be considered in order to understand *Mythopoesis* in the tradition of the Inklings.

After this deviation in my MacDonald journey, delving into Lewis and Tolkien and Barfield, I set aside some time to consider: did the Inklings’ discussion of the mythopoeic lead me to gain a deeper understanding of MacDonald as an author, even as a fantasist? Was this ‘apprehension and studied engagement’, this shaping of the ‘subsequent transmission in new forms’, representative of MacDonald’s apparently ‘mythopoeic writing’? Were his tales—claimed by so many to transcend time, to invite personal transformation—intentionally informed by those that had gone before? Was MacDonald more than just referencing, and borrowing symbols ‘second hand’, but rather actually as interested in multiple literatures of the past as these Oxford

¹ These Inklings discussions are concurrent with the ‘Futurist’ movement, which was arguing for liberation from the weight of the past. Marinetti’s *Manifesto* of 1909 summed up the major principles of the movement, which included a loathing scorn of ideas from the past, directed most frequently at political and artistic traditions.

² The experience of receiving such a story; of participating in transformation

Literature professors who sought to craft their fantastical stories with the same sort of literary engagement that they modeled in their classes and in their academic writings. Well, yes.

It did not take me long to discover that a close reading of any of MacDonald's writings will indicate that he is very intentionally rooting himself in the tradition of apprehension, engagement, and transmission. In fact, I suspect this is one of the pedagogies to which Lewis—who had an equivalent encyclopedic mental library—was referring, when he calls MacDonald his 'Master' (*Anthology* xviii). I decided to count the explicit references to other books and authors within MacDonald's first 'realistic novel' *David Elginbrod*—and discovered over ninety. This number only includes obvious references, and not the myriad of allusions or unmarked quotations that also exist. Many of those references, while implicitly shaping the story, are discussed in detail by the novel's characters, or by the narrator. And every single one of those 90 references, in some way or another, contributes to or engages with the main story line. Not one—should the thread be picked up and followed—is irrelevant. The *clearly evident* literary influences upon MacDonald's works alone number in the hundreds, and he is careful to draw explicit attention to many of them. This is not a case of simply borrowing ideas—this is something quite other.

So, I wondered ... how did MacDonald, the former preacher, get here?

A few years into my research on MacDonald I no longer considered him the wonder-boy aberration—not now that I knew more about the riches of his upbringing, even before he went off to university and discovered yet new literature. But still, to change from Congregationalist preacher to a pretty literarily focused author? It would be one thing if his literary references were mostly just biblical, or even patristic or medieval mystics—and there is no shortage of those. But once I started looking, I realized that MacDonald is a whole compendium of the literature of Western Civilization in and of himself.

And, that is where, after years of studying MacDonald, years in wonderfully musty archives, I was finally brought up short. I finally did the math. I did the math—and, I met the mentor.

First, the math: MacDonald was a minister for 29 months¹—*29 months*, in his early 20's. In contrast to those 29 months, MacDonald was a professor of English literature for ten years (in his 30's) and a lecturer on English Literature for 40 years. Waking up to this was my biggest paradigm shift as a MacDonald

¹ Just before his intended ordination in Arundel, December 1850 (due to haemorrhage attack, it had to be postponed six months) MacDonald wrote to his brother Charles: "I don't think I am settled here for life... I hope either to leave this after six or more years, or to write a poem for the good of my generation. Perhaps both" (Raeper 80).

scholar. The man I was studying was not a preacher-author (let alone a failed preacher). He was a teacher-author—and a very successful one. One who was, incidentally, in huge demand to preach for the majority of his life but who refused ever to receive payment for doing so (he turned down highly paid offers to be a minister). He would preach as a gift; his teaching—of Literature—was his paid profession. And it was his profession, his vocation—not just a nice little sideline. MacDonald was passionate about teaching literature. That was clearly evident even in his novels, in which, while there certainly is the contemporary show of preaching therein, is also included—as indicated—a considerable amount of literary exegesis. But something started to strike me as distinctive about MacDonald’s lectures: with the exception of Dante, MacDonald only ever lectured on British authors. And then I realized that his published ‘non-fictionalized’ criticism, little of it that there is, was also only on British writers—starting with a review of Browning in his 20’s, and including his anthology of Phillip Sidney, his study of Hamlet, and of course *England’s Antiphon*.

Suddenly I had a new twist in my journey. Why only British literature (plus Dante)? Especially when it is clear that MacDonald loved German Literature—and French Literature, and Classical Literature, even Russian Literature¹. Why not lecture on these too? Well, that brought me to the mentor.

After those 29 months in Arundel, MacDonald moved to Manchester. And the reason he moved there was to be near his mentor: the man to whose lectures MacDonald had dragged his friends and fellow students—and his fiancée—when he was still in seminary; the man under whom MacDonald had *chosen* to study, and whom he named his greatest influence other than his father. I knew his name: A.J. Scott. My recollection from biographies was that he had been a pastor. What I did not know, and was amazed to discover, was his claim to fame: A. J. Scott was the first ever full-time English Literature professor.

All there is space for here is tantalizing tidbits, though truly Scott is worthy of a full book biography. It is not without reason that MacDonald chose him as a mentor: he was an amazing person. Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, Frédéric Chopin—they all agree.² But what is particularly important to underscore here, in our exploration of the Victorian roots of modern fantasy, is that this mentor Scott was—like MacDonald, Tolkien, and Lewis—a passionate teacher of Literature. Like MacDonald, Tolkien, and Lewis, Scott read widely, in multiple languages, and his taste was by no means restricted to English

¹ While discussion of MacDonald’s engagement with German literature is prolific, few critics are aware that MacDonald quotes Tolstoy in his letters, and talks of how it is best to read Russian novels in French – perhaps even fewer know that he and his wife Louisa crafted an English version of Zola’s *L’Assommoir* for his family to perform. (Greville 381) Yet MacDonald’s complex engagement with Plato – let alone with other Classical writers – is perhaps one of the most surprisingly overlooked areas of his work.

² Cf. references to Scott in archived letters of each.

Literature. He was fluent in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, he was highly proficient in Italian, French, and German, and capable in Anglo-Saxon and old German. He studied texts in all of these¹.

But although Scott himself found it fascinating to spend hours in the British Library, delving into early manuscripts such as those of Bede and Chaucer, he was struck at how few of his ‘well-educated’ English acquaintances could even adequately converse about the literature of their own country. At Oxford and Cambridge the literature that was studied was Classical Literature—Greek and Roman, and some Continental. It was assumed anything British would be studied in one’s leisure time. But the reality was that most people were not studying it in their leisure time. In fact in one lecture Scott opines that while there seemed to be a growing interest in the *Nibelungen*, he could scarcely find a person who cared about *Beowulf*—he claims the prevalent English tone is that of disdain for their own ancient literature, tending to be particularly disparaging (while yet ignorant) of pre-Reformation Literature (*Middle Ages* 14).

Scott’s concerns however were by no means limited to his ‘educated’ friends—he, along with his colleague F.D. Maurice and other such ‘social reformers’ (the *Robert Falconers* of their day), were involved in setting up multiple institutions that offered university education to those who could not at that time earn a degree from Oxford or Cambridge: a rather long list, including not only working class men, or any class of women, but also anyone not part of the Church of England: Baptists, Methodists, Congregationalists, Atheists, Jews, etc.. Scott—and Maurice for that matter—was not just insistent that *all* persons should have the opportunity to receive higher-level education: he believed that it was an important aspect of self-identity, for an individual as well as a community, to know the stories of one’s heritage. In fact, Scott believed that his students would be better readers of foreign literature, and better neighbours to other cultures, for understanding who they themselves were and from whence they came².

Scott was particularly concerned about the widespread disintegration of long-term community that had been occurring throughout the Industrial Revolution, and which showed no signs of abating. He firmly believed that an effective way of fighting the unraveling of identity was to proactively re-root

¹ Letters show that MacDonald spent hours reading German Romantic fairytales from Scott’s library; Scott not only introduced MacDonald to Italian texts, but even to real-life Italian revolutionaries.

² In particular, see: “A Lecture on Popular Education”. *The Woolwich Gazette*, 10 October 1840; “On University Education”. *Introductory Lectures on the Opening of Owens College, Manchester*. London: T. Sowler, 1852; and *Suggestions on Female Education: Two Introductory Lectures on English Literature & Moral Philosophy*. London; Taylor, Walton & Maberly, 1849.

people in the stories of their identity. And so Scott, in his lectures, focused increasingly on British literature, history, and philosophy—whether when lecturing to the upper-class folk at various culture institutes or to workers down in London’s docklands. With F.D. Maurice and Thomas Carlyle, Scott also worked to establish public lending libraries, so that the gift of literacy was not stymied by a lack of accessible material. Eventually, in 1848, the University College in London appointed Scott as their first full-time English Literature professor, where he taught his students about *Beowulf*, and Chaucer, and Bede, Shakespeare and Milton and Sidney. A still-revolutionary thing to do, Scott actually had to defend the choice and *argue* for the importance of studying these British authors in his public lectures.

I do want to emphasize this here: Scott was passionate about literature from all cultures. According to his students, he even could reference texts from the Koran, the Vedas, and sacred Zoroastrian texts “without notes to hand” (Newell 345). But he believed that for the British to better understand their current story—the one they were living—they needed to know the stories, the literature and the history, that fed into that. Recognizing those roots would enable them to see how other literatures and stories had also contributed to and shaped their own. Knowing one’s identity better equipped one for dialogue. And dialogue across the ages and between disparate cultures greatly interested Scott. He believed that despite the changes and differences, from Homer to Plato to Dante to Chaucer to Shakespeare and on up to Elizabeth Gaskell, one could identify a continuum of common threads, common signs, and common truths. And these commonalities, according to Scott, demanded attention (*Two Discourses* 227).

Now, Scott’s one non-English exception as his lectures became more focused on British Literature, was the same exception made by MacDonald: Dante. Why?

A number of Scott’s obituaries actually name Scott as the top Dante scholar of the age—both Ruskin and Carlyle seem to agree.¹ And Scott explained his passion for Dante repeatedly in lectures: he details how Dante was revolutionary in writing in his own everyday language so that—and Dante himself was explicit on this point—a broader audience of ‘everyday’ Italians could read his work; Scott emphasized the deep reverence Dante had for stories and poetry that had preceded him, how Dante believed that close reading of some of these had actually transformed his worldview, also, and how Dante’s desire to both communicate and replicate this transformation, informed and enriched his own writing.²

¹ For instance see: ‘The Late Professor A.J. Scott’, *The Scotsman*, 19 January 1866. 23; *The Carlyle Letters Online* (20:72-4); *The Warrington Letters* (109; 110).

² In particular, see: *Notes of Four Lectures on the Literature and Philosophy of the*

While Dante was not one of the British writers Scott believed England needed to rediscover, and learn to read well, I believe Scott allotted this particular attention to Dante because Dante so completely embodied the message Scott was passionate to convey. Dante modeled that continuum of common threads, common signs, and common truths¹. His rigorous emphasis on rootedness in story, on communal responsibility to both persons and texts, on the general importance of communication and relationship was Scott's own. The need to recognize and understand one's own identity-forming history, to glean intentionally from the stories that have shaped one's community and oneself, combined with the realization that humanity is called to carry forward the meta-narrative by its response to these communications, were resonances with Dante that became recurrent themes in Scott's lectures. Scott saw Dante as the transition to the new modern age—because he was someone who explicitly drew upon the past so that he might speak into the present, preparing for the future (not unlike Barfield). As such, Scott believed that Dante's epic work continued to offer transformative insight—right up to the 19th Century. Scott urged his students to pay attention to not only the *Comedy*, but to other engagements with the *Comedy* in the centuries that followed.

That Scott made an exception and spent so much time devoted to this particular reading—in the midst of his emphasis on British literature—sent me forward to a new passage of my own journey, to look a little more closely at MacDonald's own obsession and close, scholarly, engagement with Dante.

I wasn't surprised to discover in that process that a mutual intimate friend of both Scott and MacDonald, John Ruskin, was also quite passionate about Dante. Reading their various conversations with and about Dante gave me deeper insight—and much greater delight—in the Dantean aspects, implicit and explicit, of *Lilith*². Threading around those relationships sent me travelling back to some of the discussions about Dante in *Seaboard Parish*, a book in which MacDonald engages with a number of Ruskin's concepts from *Modern Painters*—the first volume of which had been MacDonald's engagement present to his wife. While re-reading *Seaboard* I was suddenly struck by a passage that sounded very familiar: a discussion about *spirit, breath, wind* and, essentially, their ancient semantic unity. Almost verbatim. Could Barfield have been

Middle Ages. Edinburgh: T. Constable, 1857.

¹ Scott believed that reading in a manner that enabled one to recognize shared truths, repeated patterns, common symbols could even open the reader to “the sort of inner revelations” of which Dante spoke (*Middle Ages* 71).

² Incidentally, although *Lilith* was written at the end of the 19th Century amidst the blossoming of ‘penny-novels’, it was written with the pre-mid-19th Century expectation that a book is to be read and re-read, poured over for deeper and multi-layered meanings—never to be fully grasped at first engagement.

inspired by *Seaboard*? I knew such a passage was not in Sidney's *Defense of Poetry*. I looked elsewhere in Sidney's writings but could not find it. Then by accident I found it in Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies*. Of course: not only was MacDonald engaging with this text in *Seaboard*, but half a century later Barfield too had been conversing with and drawing upon Ruskin¹.

However, whilst searching through Sidney this time I was struck by how many of the shared emphases of both Scott and MacDonald *were* clearly iterated first by Sidney—emphases reiterated yet again in Barfield, Lewis, and Tolkien. This makes sense, as they are all arguing and modeling the same thing: that nothing comes from nothing; story begets story; poesis evokes poesis; authors transformed by their reading of a text are likely to attempt to communicate some of that engagement in the works that they themselves choose to write. These authors believed, and partook in the belief, that the more relational they were as readers, seeking to find things (*invenire*) in the works of others, the more *inventive* their own sub-creations would be. The writers I have mentioned—Sidney, Dante, Scott, MacDonald, Tolkien, Lewis—all believed this was even a divine calling: to intentionally delve deep into literature, and then respond in kind. To be *trouvers*; finders, and thence, *makers*. These men were incredible literature scholars: in order to read closely they engaged with the text; in delving deep they imbibed, even chewed upon it—and *thus* was evoked fantastic new stories. Their imaginations were rich because they had filled their coffers for years.

And they do tell us that they are doing this: Lewis says, 'go to MacDonald'; MacDonald says, 'go to Sidney, go to Dante, to Wordsworth, to Shakespeare, to Goethe, to Herbert, to Plato, to Thoreau'—a whole huge library. MacDonald uses the image in *England's Antiphon* of antiphonal choral song: one writer responding to the next, each building upon that which had been 'heard'. "No man could sing as he has sung, *had not others sung before him*. Deep answereth unto deep..." (*Antiphon* 3; italics mine).

The clearly evident 'voices' to which MacDonald's work responds number in the hundreds—and he is careful to draw explicit attention to many of them. A close reading of any of MacDonald's writings will indicate that he is intentionally placing himself in this tradition of apprehension, engagement, and transmission. MacDonald even goes so far as to describe this as a 'relationship' with writers of the past, saying that engaging this way can at times "place in your hands a key to their inmost thoughts" (*Donal Grant* 227). They are not thoughts with which MacDonald always agrees: even with his beloved Dante, he

¹ Appropriately that text of *Sesame and Lilies* had begun as a lecture Ruskin gave in Manchester four years before *Seaboard* was published, to assist a professor he greatly admired—named A.J. Scott—raise money for public lending libraries and working class schools.

champions some ideas, argues with others, and suggests a different angle of approach to yet others. But repeatedly he—a good student of Scott—draws attention to the continuum of common threads, symbols, insights. MacDonald never engages with only one text in his creations; rather, he is engaging in a conversation of texts, balancing arguments against each other, and seeking those points of convergence¹. It is little wonder that libraries are the setting for so many important relational engagements in his novels! Look closely at an image or phrase and one will see, say, how he is engaging with Ruskin's engagement with Blake's engagement with Sidney's engagement with Paul's engagement with the Greek myth of *Psyche*.

The writers whom MacDonald references most frequently, repeatedly, are those who also intentionally place themselves in this tradition of literary conversation, a relational tradition that recognizes that its participants cannot stand alone. As to his effectiveness, well, that other encyclopedic brain, Ruskin—who knew all of Britain's literati—writes: “I am always glad to hear you lecture myself—and if I had a son, I would rather he took his lessons in literary taste under you than under any person I know, for you would make him more than a scholar, [you would make him] a living and thoughtful reader”; and “of all the literary men I know, I think you most love literature itself; the others love themselves and the expression of themselves; but you enjoy your own art, and the art of others, when it is fine” (Beinecke 1/3/127).

MacDonald writes that “the best thing you can do for your fellow, next to rousing his conscience, is – not to give him things to think about, but to wake things up that are in him; or say, to make him think things for himself” (*Anthology* 29, “Fantastic Imagination” 196). While it does seem to me that there are times in which MacDonald's own opinions do get in the way of his achieving this, it is clearly a goal of his—and certainly sufficient testimony exists that he has been successful with plenty of readers from the 19th Century through to the 21st. Not only have his stories pointed readers to other pieces of literature, by modeling discussions with them, but in doing so he has successfully invited his readers into that conversation. Others have become *trouvers*: partaken, engaged, concurred, refuted. Related.

Relationships require effort. Literary relationships, as well as personal ones. Some of us are more like Vane in *Lilith* or Stoddart in *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood*: better at hiding in books and avoiding the complications and taxations of people². Some of us are more like the Little Ones in *Lilith*: lovers who haven't really even tried to learn. (I think I have my spells of being each.) MacDonald dares to say that if one must judge, to be the latter is better than the

¹ Strikingly, the stories that arise from these conversations are not only cohesive, but have been found by many readers to be transformational.

² “We spoil countless things by intellectual greed” (“Fantastic Imagination” 194).

former: “to understand” he writes, “is not more wonderful than to love” (*Lilith* 57). Still, he is very clear: to love without making an effort to understand is problematic—he details this clearly with the Little Ones. MacDonald—and Tolkien and Lewis after him—believed that in order to be a sub-creator, one must study works of creation: closely, with intention. Nothing comes from nothing. The more rich the foundation, the fount from which one’s ink is drawn, the more rich the new creation. The greater the depth of engagement with that which has come before, the greater the dimensionality of the new creations that follow—creations likely, says MacDonald, to carry even more meaning than the authors intend¹.

In plainspeak: should one wish to write fantasy, these men would argue that the more intentional one is about reading texts that have engaged in that long conversation, and about reading such texts deeply, carefully—actually engaging with them, developing a type of relationship with them, spending time—the better one’s fantastical writing will be. One will be less likely to have ‘mythopoeic’ slapped on by an optimistic publisher, and more likely to go down in the annals as a mythopoeic writer in the tradition of the Inklings and MacDonald; a story crafter because one is a story scholar—and even more importantly, a story lover.

So, forget the small-town boy who broke free from his repressive religious background into the forbidden delights of Romanticism. Forget the penniless preacher forced to write fiction to feed his kids. Consider, instead, the farmboy raised in a world rich with story and imagination—of multiple genres—and with a love of science and of creation. Consider the young man encouraged by his father to *explore* theology, and discover mentors worthy of admiration. And consider one of English Literature’s early teachers—mentored by its first ever full-time professor. MacDonald was a Celt fluent in German and French literature, who read daily in Hebrew and Greek, who knew Shakespeare inside out², and who wanted everyone to know his ‘friends’ Dante and Sidney and Herbert. He was a teacher-author passionate to draw others into a potentially transformative conversation of story upon story, agreeing, disagreeing, interweaving through genre and culture; to enable others to recognize patterns and convergences from classical and biblical through patristic and Celtic, medieval and renaissance, up through Romantic literature and beyond; to urge

¹ “The truer its art, the more things it will mean [...] when such forms are new embodiments of Old Truths, we call them products of the Imagination” (“Fantastic Imagination” 192).

² In 1874 MacDonald was a vice-president of the “New Shakespere Society” [sic], which included a number of royals, academics, artists, and bishops, including Ruskin, Dante Rossetti, the Cowper-Temples, Thomas H. Huxley, and Max Müller (*Issue Two* 1). Browning was the president. That year in London MacDonald gave a six-lecture series on Shakespeare (Kings London 8/5/3).

others to then respond to them—in the deep conviction that such responsive reading would evoke new perceptions.

Beware of pigeon-holing MacDonald into a category—beware even more: pigeon-holing his influences. In the wealth of those stories that begat his own, lie the roots of 20th and 21st Century fantasy, roots that will continue threading well into the centuries yet to come. Personally, I have discovered that the more effort I make to get to know the many disparate writers to whom MacDonald proffers introductions, and the more I learn from my colleagues about who and what they have discovered, the further I progress in my own journey of understanding MacDonald as a writer. I have had to let go of many pre-conceptions and misconceptions along the way, and I have no doubt that that will continue to be the case. But in trying to come to grips with what Lewis and Tolkien meant when they called MacDonald a mythopoeic writer, I think I have also come to a place of better understanding what makes their own fantasy as rich as it is. It is not pastiche; it is not second-hand symbols. Many such ‘fantasy’ novels do exist, and are currently being written. But there are also fantasy writers—“living and thoughtful readers”—such as Neil Gaiman, Terry Pratchett, N.D. Wilson, Jeffrey Overstreet—who, like Tolkien and Lewis and MacDonald, have read deeply, widely, well; who value dearly the conversations that have gone before, even those with which they do not agree; and who are now relating their own ‘inventions.’ Such are authors who love the mythopoeic *art*.

The authors who pioneered the way for modern fantasy were convinced that writers must be transformed by engagement with others before they could give voice to something new—especially if that work was to invite transformative insights or experiences for the reader. To stand in a tradition of mythopoeic Story is both to receive and to be part of ‘passing on’ that which is infused with myths that have gone before. It is rooting oneself deeply in an inheritance of participation¹. For me, this discovery was a—not *the*, *a*—golden key, in my on-going progression of navigating the fantasy of Teacher–Author, George MacDonald.

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¹ “When we read rejoicingly the true song-speech of one of our singing brethren, we hold song-worship with him and with all who have thus at any time shared in his feelings, even if he has passed centuries ago into the ‘high countries’ of song” (*England’s Antiphon* 2).

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